

Nurturing the spiritual well-being of children with special needs

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Spirituality is of acknowledged and profound importance to children from mainstream school populations, but has been overlooked in respect of children with special needs. This article explores the issues related to spirituality and disabilities, and the relationship between spirituality and education for students with special needs. The following aspects are considered: (a) holistic perspectives on education for students with disabilities; (b) spirituality as an integral element of special education and interventions; and (c) implications for educational programmes for students with disabilities. This article concludes that work in addressing issues related to spirituality and the implications for working with students with disabilities need to be given serious consideration.

Key words: disabilities, spirituality, special education, interventions.

Introduction

There is a general consensus that spirituality has profound importance for children. In many countries of the world, children's spirituality is included in the school curriculum. For instance, in the United Kingdom, the 2011 Education Act mandates that schools promote children's spiritual development (HM Government, 2011). Australia, New Zealand and many other European countries also require schools to promote spiritual development in children.

Indeed, the spiritual dimension of life has the potential to affect quality of life for individuals with and without disabilities alike. More specifically, spirituality can positively impact one's emotional and physical well-being, relationships, self-determination and social inclusion (Ault, 2010; Zhang, 2010). Unfortunately, despite the impact of spirituality on people's lives, research in this area is still relatively rare; overall there has been very little connecting spirituality in education to children with disabilities (e.g., Kauffman, 2001; Zhang, 2010). To fill this gap, this article explores issues related to spirituality and disabilities, and the relationship between spirituality and education for students with special needs. Implications for educational programmes will also be presented.

Holistic perspectives on education for students with disabilities

At the outset there is a need to explain the key terms used in this article: *disability*, *special needs*, *special education*, *spirituality* and *religion*. *Disability* is an umbrella term which refers to impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. A disability exists when an impairment limits the ability to perform certain tasks (e.g., to walk, to see or to add a row of numbers) in the same way as most people do. The term *special needs* describes individuals who require assistance for disabilities that may be medical, mental or psychological. Individuals with autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), for example, may be considered to have special needs. Although literature that uses ideas beyond the discourse of 'needs' and 'deficits' may be relevant to this article, for the sake of brevity the term *special needs* is used interchangeably with *disability*. *Special education* is operationally defined as specialised/individualised instruction and services provided to children with disabilities, in both special schools and *inclusive* settings, so that these children can achieve the outcomes expected of all students.

Although there is great diversity among the various spiritual perspectives represented in the literature, according to Alexander and McLaughlin (2003), *spirituality* can be broadly divided into two categories: a religiously tethered conception of spirituality, and a religiously untethered conception of spirituality. The former is linked to traditions of a religious faith. As Alexander and McLaughlin (2003) put it, a religiously tethered conception of spirituality takes its shape and structure from various aspects of religion. In contrast, a religiously untethered conception of spirituality, as the name implies, is linked to beliefs and practices that are disconnected from religions. This form of spirituality is unstructured, less specific, open-ended and diffused, and often propels the search for meaning, purpose and identity in life, as well as perceptions that concern the essential nature of the world (Alexander and McLaughlin, 2003). For the current purpose, *religion* is broadly defined as an organised and shared system of beliefs and practices related to a transcendent entity (e.g., God), and is closely linked to a particular faith institution. While both conceptions of spirituality are important for children with and without disabilities alike, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss both conceptions in detail.

As previously indicated, spirituality covers a wide range of human experience; one does not have to hold formal religious beliefs, or belong to an established faith tradition, to experience the spiritual dimension (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2009). Spirituality is reflected in a person's perception about the essential nature of the world, and is often identified with experiencing a deep-seated sense of meaning and purpose in life, together with a sense of belonging. Further, the spiritual dimension seeks harmony with the universe, strives for answers about the infinite and often comes into focus in times of stress, illness, loss, bereavement and death (e.g., Hay, 1998; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2009).

It must also be recognised that this desire for wholeness resides in the essence of what it means to be human; hence it is present in people with and without disabilities (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2009). Research in rehabilitation and mental health suggests that spirituality is an important aspect in the lives of people with disabilities (e.g., George *et al.*, 2000; Pearce *et al.*, 2003). In addition, because of the benefits of spirituality to one's general well-being, some professionals working with individuals with disabilities are increasingly interested in the relationship between spirituality and interventions (e.g., Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2009; Ault, 2010). For instance, Dr Richard Sloan, a psychiatrist at Columbia University, maintained that spirituality plays a substantial role in helping individuals with mental disorders overcome discomfort (Park, 2009). Others have also argued that while providing interventions for students with disabilities, it is important for teachers to attend to the sense of having a purpose and meaning (e.g., Zhang, 2010).

Literature indicates that the spirituality of people with disabilities can be a valuable source of social and psychological support. Benefits of good-quality spiritual care include: (a) improved relationships with oneself, others (be it human or the divine) and the world; and (b) a new sense of meaning, resulting in reawakening of hope and peace of mind, enabling people, especially those facing tremendous challenges such as a severe disability, to accept and live with problems not yet resolved (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2009). Attention to the spiritual dimension can also help students with special needs experience a feeling of belonging and being valued, and a sense of safety, respect and dignity (Swinton, 2001; Zhang, 2010).

Indeed, an education that neglects the spiritual dimension creates disconnection (Miller, 2006). On the other hand, a holistic education that attends to all developmental domains such as the social, aesthetic, language, affective, physical, cognitive and the spiritual dimension calls forth from people an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning. It challenges practices and concepts that mainly emphasise learning as a mere intellectual activity and policies that make economic development the primary aim, and provides an alternative 'to a more human, meaningful, and intellectually rigorous learning environment' (Seymour, 2004, p. 11). This is a serious implication that needs to be

taken into account when educators and other professionals make decisions for classrooms, schools and services for children with special needs.

Spirituality as an integral element of special education and interventions

According to So (2000), one's religious/spiritual orientation may foster healthy or pathological behavioural patterns in children and families. Spiritual orientations have a strong influence on students' coping behaviours, and family and teachers' commitment and involvement with education and services. In addition, central aspects of spirituality such as beliefs about the world influence the meaning and acceptance of disability. Spiritual values also shed light on the meaning of life and increase acceptance of people with disabilities as whole persons (Boswell *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, as the core of life, spiritual issues should be integrated into the education and services for children with disabilities.

According to Narayanasamy *et al.* (2002), the spiritual aspect can be a vital source of meaning making, friendship, acceptance and self-worth. The integration of the development of mind, body and spirit in education has a significant role in helping the child with special needs to become self-actualised (Daly, 2004; Miller, 2006). According to Daly (2004), self-actualisation is about the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities and potentials. Other characteristics of self-actualisation, which are relevant to lives of students with special needs, include perceiving reality efficiently, tolerating uncertainty and the ability to accept themselves and others for what they are (Maslow, 1970). Self-actualising children, both with and without disabilities, are more likely to fulfil their potential and do the best of which they are capable (Daly, 2004). In spite of disabilities, sorrow and disappointment, self-actualised children can enjoy and appreciate the life given to them. Educators of students with special needs would do well to acknowledge and honour the spiritual dimension of life and to help these students become self-actualised.

However, as indicated earlier, despite the impact of spiritual development on a child's life, there are very few studies that focus directly on the relationship between spirituality and disability (e.g., Kauffman, 2001). When it comes to the area of holistic education and special education, the lack of literature is even more acute. This could be related to a general unwillingness to address spiritual issues and the emotional needs of children with special needs. It may also be that teachers and professionals are not equipped to recognise and respond to the spiritual needs of students with disabilities. Furthermore, with the policy of the separation of church and state in many countries, it appears that educators rarely want to touch topics about the spiritual aspect of the lives of students with disabilities. This paucity of literature also suggests that spirituality may be an underused resource in the lives of individuals with disabilities in general, and

children with special needs in particular. This being said, what are the strategies teachers can use to help nurture the spiritual well-being of students with special needs? The following sections present implications for educational programmes that address the spiritual dimension of learning.

Implications for educational programmes for students with disabilities

By incorporating spiritual elements such as beauty, truth, wonder and goodness into the curriculum, teachers can foster the children's inner life and spiritual curiosity (Lawson, 1996). For example, through art, students with special needs can express their own inner world and join in the celebration of life, developing a sense of reverence for creation. Through expressive arts such as sculpture, painting, drama and dance, students can explore chosen activities that engage their spirit and senses, while at the same time expand the ways in which they know and experience the world. Even children with severe special needs are able to create their own musical expressions by singing, humming, chanting or using toys or instruments. Play can also become spiritual when a child is allowed to follow his or her natural interests freely, using toys and materials as an expression of the soul.

Stories and literature can capture the imagination, heart and mind of children. Meaningful literature can be used to stimulate, enrich and touch a child's inner life. Stories, when used appropriately, allow children to learn about themselves and others by appealing to both intellect and heart.

There are many children's books that contain spiritual elements of love, kindness, wonder and magic; others directly encompass principles of spirituality such as the cycle of birth, life and death. For example, C. S. Lewis' (1950) *Chronicles of Narnia* series, Sheldon Oberman's (1994) *The Always Prayer Shawl* and Chris Van Allsburg's (1985) *The Polar Express* are stories that allow children to explore and share their spiritual inquiries. Inspiring books and stories can become powerful tools to develop an individual's self-concept, to provide a way for a person to find interest outside their self, to improve reading comprehension and to foster emotional and spiritual development (e.g., Sridhar and Vaughn, 2000). One only has to review the body of existing children's literature to realise that many stories were designed to help children form socially approved behaviours and spiritual values.

Social and emotional skills help students with disabilities understand their unique personalities, strengths and weaknesses. Programmes and activities that teach students life management skills in all aspects will help them live a balanced life and grow spiritually (Dowling, 2009). For instance, teachers can integrate spirituality into the social skills lessons, using parables and stories from different faiths as examples to teach morality. Students can bring in lyrics from popular songs and critique them from the point of view of the Ten Commandments.

Last but not least, as authentic learning gets to the heart of what it is to be human (Palmer, 2003), opportunities should be given to students to search for life's meaning and purpose in light of their strengths and limitations. For instance, teachers can look for ways to help students to become more caring, more tolerant, more connected with others and more actively engaged in a spiritual quest. Questions teachers can explore with their students include: how students make meaning of their education and their lives; how they develop a sense of purpose; the value and belief dilemmas that they experience; as well as the role of religion, the sacred and the mystical in their lives.

Conclusions

This article has argued that though the role of spirituality in special education is a recent phenomenon, its discussion has the potential to contribute to the field of diversity and education for children with disability. Since spirituality is an integral element of student development and learning, teachers and other professionals working with students with disabilities need to acknowledge and honour the spiritual dimension of life and see beyond the physical and academic aspects of disability. Looking at the teaching/learning process and special needs through a holistic lens reveals a different view of the classroom and of the interaction between teacher and student, giving educators opportunities to touch and foster the inner growth of students with special needs. Therefore, work in addressing issues related to spirituality and the implications it brings for working with students with disabilities need to be given serious consideration.

This article also presents several implications for educational programmes for students with disabilities. As indicated, in a holistic curriculum, education involves the whole person, and the purpose of holistic education is to cultivate growing young persons in their relationship with the world, themselves and others (Miller, 2006). From a holistic perspective, though knowledge of disability, behaviour management, sequentially ordered commercial materials and tightly controlled direct instruction are important, it is also critical to have knowledge of the student and knowledge of how to design meaningful experiences around who they are, rather than who they are not. After all, 'knowledge, skills, and technology are essentially meaningless in the absence of something – or *Someone* – giving us a higher purpose, value, and standard of success' (Su, 2008, p. 259).

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